

## Aberystwyth University

### “Are Monads so Much Less Than Men?”:

Birch, Catherine

*Published in:*

Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies

*Publication date:*

2019

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Birch, C. (2019). “Are Monads so Much Less Than Men?”: Interspecies Hierarchies and the Female Brain in May Kendall’s Evolutionary Poetry. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 15(3).

#### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

#### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400  
email: [is@aber.ac.uk](mailto:is@aber.ac.uk)

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 15.3 (WINTER 2019)

---

## **Are Monads So Much Less Than Men?: Interspecies Hierarchies and the Female Brain in May Kendall's Evolutionary Poetry**

By Katy Birch, Aberystwyth University

<1>Over the past decade there has been increasing critical interest in the ways in which many female nineteenth-century poets “used poetry to challenge the naturalization of Victorian ideals of femininity within evolutionary discourse” (Holmes, “Challenge” 56). In response to the frequent use of evolution to support the idea of female inferiority, exemplified by Darwin’s claim in the *Descent of Man* that male superiority is demonstrated by “man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman” (629), poets such as Mathilde Blind and Constance Naden refuted lazy gender stereotypes, emphasized the importance of female choice in sexual selection and demonstrated the centrality of processes of birth and mothering to evolution.<sup>1</sup> However, less critical attention has been paid to women’s indirect interventions in debates about evolution and gender, which could take the form of viewing evolution from a more egalitarian perspective or displacing debates about women’s rights onto other species. In this article I will focus on May Kendall and the evolutionary poetry that she published in *Punch* magazine and the “Science” section of her 1887 collection *Dreams to Sell*. Focusing particularly on Kendall’s responses to the science of craniology and her depictions of evolution’s blurring of boundaries between seemingly distinct groups, I will argue that she displaces debates about gender and brain size onto other species and presents a reading of evolution that is implicitly anti-hierarchical and that undermines rigid categories.

<2>Although Kendall is often described by critics as a feminist or New Woman, her work rarely addresses gender directly, and some of her poetry in *Punch* even mocks or criticizes the New Woman (Birch 359). Her reputation as a feminist rests largely on one poem, “Woman’s Future,” which I will discuss shortly. Kendall’s feminism is not straightforward and is complicated by her strong commitment to socialism, which often overshadows any focus on gender, and by the publication of many of her poems in *Punch*. Although *Punch*’s misogyny is sometimes overstated by feminist critics,<sup>2</sup> it was “a periodical written largely by men for a predominantly male audience” and its attitude towards women’s rights was often ambivalent (Noakes 101). In most cases, *Punch*’s female contributors did not openly counter the generally conservative tone of the periodical and this may help to explain why Kendall’s poems rarely address gender overtly. Nevertheless, Margaret Debelius has suggested that women’s writing for *Punch* could contain ideas beneath the surface that were at odds with the anti-feminism often found in *Punch*’s pages. She argues that Ada Levenson “quietly subverted *Punch*’s attitude by anonymously publishing her humorous sketches sympathetic to both Wilde and women” (194). The idea of “quiet subversion” can also be applied to Kendall’s poetry, in both *Punch* and *Dreams to Sell*. Kendall’s humorous poetry unsettles hierarchies between species and individuals, defamiliarizes or questions elements of her society, ridicules smug male characters and foregrounds minority perspectives. Although Darwin’s work could often be used to support a hierarchical, conservative view of society, it

contained elements that could lead to the opposite conclusions. Kendall's reading of evolution shows awareness of these elements and emphasizes the destabilizing aspects of Darwin's theory. She uses these aspects to imply that a view of evolution that is based on ideas of superiority and inferiority is a misunderstanding that is in conflict with true Darwinian thinking. *Punch*, with its focus on humor and its tendency to look askant at modern life, gave her an arena for exploring these alternative interpretations of evolution. Kendall's poetry rarely addresses gender directly but she writes from a marginalized perspective that is implicitly female. Her light-hearted responses to evolution highlight aspects of Darwin's work that undermine hierarchical ideas and subtly call into question anthropocentric and patriarchal values.

### **The Missing Five Ounces of the Female Brain**

<3>Although Kendall's feminism is often complicated and indirect, "Woman's Future," the final poem in the "Science" section of *Dreams to Sell*, openly challenges the scientific discourse surrounding female inferiority. This poem is significant because it demonstrates Kendall's awareness of the ways that evolutionary theory could be used to reinforce human social inequality and, for a reader encountering this poem in *Dreams to Sell*, it provides a gendered context for the poems about hierarchies and inequality that have preceded it. In "Woman's Future" Kendall parodies scientists' claims that women have smaller brains than men and are consequently less intelligent. This attitude is exemplified by the 1887 article "Mental Differences Between Men and Women" by the biologist George Romanes, who declared that: "Seeing that the average brain-weight of women is about five ounces less than that of men ... we should be prepared to expect a marked inferiority of intellectual power in the former" (654-5). Romanes's article suggests ways in which these differences in brain size manifest themselves. Although his evidence is largely anecdotal, he claims the authority of science while dismissing as unscientific the argument that the paucity of great intellectual women in history has been due to women's social position and not a lack of intelligence (665). Romanes's assertion that "in the animal kingdom as a whole the males admit of being classified ... in one psychological species and the females in another" (654) echoes Darwin's claim in the *Descent* that there is an innate difference in disposition and mental powers between men and women, just as "the bull differs in disposition from the cow, the wild-boar from the sow, the stallion from the mare" (629).

<4>"Woman's Future" begins by summarizing the arguments of Romanes and others like him:

Complacent they tell us, hard hearts and derisive,  
In vain is our ardour: in vain are our sighs:  
Our intellects, bound by a limit decisive,  
To the level of Homer's may never arise. (ll. 1-4)

The poem then turns with hope to the future:

We heed not the falsehood, the base innuendo,  
The laws of the universe, these are our friends.  
Our talents shall rise in a mighty crescendo,  
We trust Evolution to make us amends! (5-8)

Kendall encourages women to change their behavior, by focusing on intellectual activities rather than “Decorum” (16), and to work towards a future in which they will be regarded as the more intellectual sex:

Oh, wait for the time when our brains shall expand!  
When once we’re enthroned, you shall never dethrone us –  
The poets, the sages, the seers of the land! (34-36)

Although Kendall does not refer directly to Romanes, both Romanes’s article and Kendall’s poem focus on scientific approaches to sexual inequality, both allude to the role of environmental factors in creating or exaggerating gender differences and both suggest ways that these are likely to change in the future. *Dreams to Sell* was published in October 1887, five months after Romanes’s article. Given that it was only in September of that year that Kendall contacted *Punch* to ask for permission to reprint the poems that would form the core of the “Science” section, it is likely that the rest of the collection was still a work in progress in May when Romanes’s article was published and so this poem can be read as a response to Romanes’s ideas.<sup>3</sup>

<5>The main theme that Kendall and Romanes have in common is their exploration of gendered differences in brains and their allusions to craniology, a sub-section of anthropology that focuses on the measurement of skulls and brains and was at its peak in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. One of craniology’s main contributions to anthropology was to give scientific support to the theory that people of color and white women are less intelligent than white men by perpetuating the belief that brain size is a faithful indicator of intellect (Fee 420). The findings of craniologists form part of Darwin’s discussion of sexual and racial difference in the *Descent*. He argues that “[t]he belief that there exists in man some close relation between the size of the brain and the development of the intellectual faculties is supported by the comparison of the skulls of savage and civilised races” (74). In other words, Darwin found craniology convincing because it reinforced the racial prejudices that he already held. Craniology was particularly successful at reinforcing the long-standing prejudice of women’s intellectual inferiority because women do, on average, have slightly smaller brains than men, in proportion to their smaller body size (Gould 104). The idea that brain size may be proportional to body size, rather than being directly correlated with intelligence, was raised during the nineteenth century, particularly in relation to what Elizabeth Fee calls the “elephant problem:”

If either the absolute size of the brain or cranial volume was to be taken as a measure of intelligence, then the elephant and the whale must be the lords of creation. (421)

However, when some scientists attempted to measure brain weight as a proportion of body weight they found that many women had proportionally heavier brains than men and so they did not pursue that line of investigation (Gould 106). Women’s smaller brain size was still being used as evidence of female inferiority at the end of the nineteenth century, even after many scientists had admitted that craniology had not provided conclusive proof of women’s lower intellect (Malane 11).

<6>“Woman’s Future” alludes to craniology’s role in perpetuating the myth of female inferiority by associating the “limit decisive” (3) that restricts female intellect with the size of the brain: this deficiency will be remedied in the future when “our brains shall expand” (34).

As well as describing the scientists' argument that there are biological limits to women's intellectual achievements, the early lines of the poem also imitate scientific discourse in the claim that women's intelligence "To the level of Homer may never arise" (4). This is a parody of the technique used by anthropologists and craniologists, when talking about gender or racial difference, of comparing one exceptional white man with the average woman or African (Stepan xviii). An example of this is Darwin's comparison of "a savage who uses hardly any abstract terms" with "a Newton or Shakspeare [sic]" (*Descent* 86). Like Darwin, Kendall uses Newton as an example of male intellect in the poem, followed by Herbert Spencer: "the knowledge of Newton will beam from your faces,/ The soul of a Spencer will shine in your eyes" (31-2). The use of this technique roots the poem in the scientific discourse about human difference and implies the inequality of such a comparison.

<7>Kendall's description of women's trivial interests stemming from their feelings having been "compressed in Society's mangle" (13) hints at the argument that many mental differences between the sexes are socially constructed, in contrast to Romanes's confidence that women have innate natural abilities in "the arrangement of flowers, the furnishing of rooms, the choice of combinations in apparel" (658). As Fabienne Moine observes of this poem, "it is now *culture*, not nature which blocks women's further advance" (247). John Holmes notes that Kendall's poem does not depict providential evolution, in which progress will inevitably occur once enough time has elapsed, but instead she insists that "[p]olitical and spiritual progress must be achieved through the 'lifework' of individuals" (Holmes "Lay" III.8). In this way, Kendall makes women responsible for their own evolutionary destiny instead of depicting them as passive beneficiaries of evolutionary progress. Although Kendall partially accepts the concept of female intellectual inferiority by insisting that this situation will be remedied in the future, she does remind scientists that change is central to evolution and so these supposed inequalities are not permanent. She also highlights the role of craniology in exaggerating differences by alluding to debates about brain size.

<8>"Woman's Future" includes mildly comical imagery, such as the exhortation to women to "[i]nvent a new planet, a flying-machine" (28), and amusing multisyllabic rhymes such as "innuendo" and "crescendo" (5, 7). However, the humor in this poem is more muted than in many of Kendall's other poems on the theme of science, and the scathing wit of work such as her best-known poem, "Lay of the Trilobite," is absent from Kendall's treatment of scientific sexism in this poem. When the humor in "Woman's Future" has a clear target it tends to be women themselves: "empty and vain is the end you pursue./ In antimacassars the world you may smother;/ But intellect marches o'er them and o'er you" (22-4). Nancy A. Walker argues that "the put-down of self has long been a staple of the woman's humorous stance" because it is "ingratiating rather than aggressive" (123). She demonstrates that, for marginalized groups such as women and ethnic minorities, mockery of one's self or one's group "allows the speaker or writer to participate in the humorous process without alienating the members of the majority" (ibid.). In "Woman's Future", Kendall's only poem to address scientific sexism directly, she avoids mocking men or male-dominated institutions and instead opts for the safer approach of directing her humor at her own group.

<9>Although none of Kendall's other science poetry refers overtly to gender, several themes from "Woman's Future", such as the allusions to craniology and the use of parody as a response to scientific discourse, recur in her other, less overtly gendered poems. These other poems displace human social inequalities onto other species or provide an alternative reading of evolution that is implicitly destabilizing without referring directly to the social implications of Darwin's work. This is particularly true of "Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus," in

which Kendall displaces the theme of male and female brains onto a question of species difference and is consequently able to be more openly scathing in her depiction of craniology. “Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus” was originally published in *Punch* two years before Romanes’s article came out, but, like “Woman’s Future,” it engages with the language and concerns of craniology and shows an awareness of the social applications of this science. In this poem, an ichthyosaurus in a museum, “Frequented by sages profound” (2), describes the pleasures of his simple life before he was a fossil but laments his small brain and scientists’ comments on his limited intelligence:

Ere man was developed, our brother,  
     We swam and we ducked and we dived,  
 And we dined, as a rule, on each other –  
     What matter, the toughest survived.  
 Our paddles were fins, and they bore us  
     Through water: in air we could fly;  
 But the brain of the Ichthyosaurus  
     Was never a match for his eye. (9-16)

The ichthyosaurus insists that “A loftier goal is before us,/ For higher endowments we sigh” (29-30), but in contrast to “Woman’s Future,” the poem’s conclusion leaves the ichthyosaurus trapped in the same situation with no hope of change: “We are bound to confess with a sigh/ That the brain of the Ichthyosaurus/ Was *never* so good as his eye!” (62-4).

<10>In this poem Kendall takes the idea of mental differences between different sexes and races being equivalent to species difference, as in Romanes’s description of males and females representing two separate “psychological species” (654), to its logical conclusion by using a creature of a different species to stand in for all people who are depicted as inferior in the work of craniologists. Instead of men and women being portrayed as mentally different, they are both grouped together when the ichthyosaurus describes the human intelligence he aspires to:

Oh Brain that is bulgy with learning,  
     Oh wisdom of women and men,  
 Oh Maids for a First that are yearning,  
     Oh youths that are lectured by Wren! (49-52)

Meanwhile, the ichthyosaurus is in women’s position of being excluded from intellectual activity and can only “sigh” “[f]or higher endowments” (30). This line links to the “sighs” of intellectual women in “Woman’s Future” (2), implicitly linking the ichthyosaurus to women. It is also significant that the ichthyosaurus mentions the “Little-Go” examinations at Cambridge (59), which women were allowed to sit from the 1870s onwards despite not being able to take degrees. This can be read as an allusion to debates about higher education for women, even though Kendall does not make this association explicit. Kendall elides the gender aspect of the subject again in the observation that “[s]ometimes [the brain] explodes at high pressure/ Of some overwhelming demand” (41-2). This reflects a common concern about female education: that women’s weaker brains and bodies would be harmed by intensive intellectual activity, and that their reproductive systems would suffer as the energy

needed for physiological processes was diverted to the brain. The poem makes this idea appear comical without acknowledging that it refers specifically to women's brains.

<11>“Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus” does not contest the assumptions of craniologists but it does ridicule the science more overtly than “Woman’s Future” does. Kendall mocks craniology by parodying its language in phrases like “mark but the fair convolution/ And size of the Aryan brain” (35-6) and by reducing the study of different parts of the brain to an observation that it is “bulging in many directions” (39). The ichthyosaurus’s assessment of the importance of the intelligence that he is denied is also gently mocking: the highest compliment he pays to the “Aryan brain” is that it is “furnished for School Board inspections,/ And garnished for taking degrees” (37-8); there is no suggestion that such intelligence enables people to effect genuine change. Displacing the theme of gender inequality onto another species allows Kendall to explore this theme without seeming too assertive or potentially threatening. In her indirect allusions to science and gender inequality she does not feel the need to direct her humor at herself or other women to avoid alienating her audience in the way that she does when she discusses gender more overtly. As well as protecting herself from a potentially hostile reaction, Kendall’s displacement of themes of brain size and inequality from their usual gendered or racial context defamiliarizes these themes and allows her readers to view them objectively. Poems like “Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus” highlight the inherent ridiculousness of some of the language and ideas of craniology but without referring directly to craniology’s role in propping up gendered and racial hierarchies. In this way, Kendall attacks some of the intellectual foundations of scientific sexism but without provoking a defensive response from readers who sought to maintain the status quo. In the remainder of this article I will explore similar instances of displacement in Kendall’s depictions of liminality and ambiguity as key evolutionary themes. These themes are even less overtly linked to gender than her engagement with the theme of brain size but Kendall uses them to suggest an anti-hierarchical reading of evolution that is consistent with a feminist perspective.

### **The Others of Evolution**

<12>Although the version of “social Darwinism” that we are more familiar with uses Darwin’s ideas to support existing social hierarchies, this was not the only way that Darwinism could be applied to human society. A similar set of ideas could act as the basis both for Herbert Spencer’s laissez faire individualism and Peter Kropotkin’s belief in anarchy and mutual cooperation. As George Levine has demonstrated, none of these readings were misreadings but were rather a testament to the flexibility of Darwin’s theory:

But the history of interpretations of Darwin is not the history of a series of intellectuals who simply misinterpret him for their own purposes. Rather, virtually all of them legitimately located in his writings arguments that might sanction their own positions (xi)

Despite the popular association of evolution with the idea of progress from lower to higher forms, Darwin frequently commented on the difficulty of using terms such as “higher” and “lower” to refer to different species:

The embryo in the course of development generally rises in organisation: I use this expression, though I am aware that it is hardly possible to define clearly what is meant by the organisation being higher or lower. (*Origin* 420-1)

Darwin's research notebooks take this idea even further:

It is absurd to talk of one animal being higher than another. – We consider those, where the cerebral structure/ intellectual faculties most developed, as highest. – A bee doubtless would when the instincts were. (Darwin, *Notebooks* 74)

Just as Darwin's work questions anthropocentric values by imaginatively inhabiting the perspectives of other species, Kendall's evolutionary poetry forces the reader to step out of their limited, human perspective in order to imply that a hierarchical view of evolution is incorrect.

<13>In "The Lower Life," from *Dreams to Sell*, Kendall demonstrates that no species has been rendered perfect by evolution, and highlights ways in which other species may be seen as superior to humans:

It might seem matter for regret  
That Evolution has not yet  
    Fulfilled our wishes.  
The birds soar higher far than we,  
The fish outswim us in the sea,  
    The simple fishes. (1-6)

Kendall's poem places humans and other animals on a level of equality by suggesting that the ability to swim or fly could be seen as equivalent to human intelligence and that she would need to live as other species before she could judge which state was better:

Ah, could I be a fish indeed,  
Of lucky horoscope, and creed  
    Utilitarian,  
'Mong blissful waves to glide or rest,  
I'd choose the lot I found the best,  
    Or fish or Aryan! (49-54)

The ending of the poem places flying ability and human reason on a level of equality and suggests that any attempt to privilege one over the other would simply be a matter of preference:

Or could I be a bird and fly  
Through forests all unhaunted by  
    The shooting season,  
I'd tell you which I voted for,  
The flight of airy pinions, or  
    The March of Reason! (55-60)

This conclusion undermines interspecies hierarchies by implying that the notion of human superiority is entirely open to question and that the experience of a fish or bird might be preferable: for the poem's speaker, a bird's "airy pinions" could potentially be experienced as an improvement on the human "March of Reason."



<14>Late-Victorian commentators on evolution, both evolutionists and anti-evolutionists, often touch upon the idea of human inferiority to other species, at least in some aspects, but this idea is normally treated briefly and then dismissed. An early example of this can be found in the philologist Max Müller's 1861 lecture, "The Theoretical Stage, and the Origin of Language:"

Are there not many creatures in many points more perfect even than man? Do we not envy the lion's strength, the eagle's eye, the wings of every bird? If there existed animals altogether as perfect as man in their physical structure, nay, even more perfect, no thoughtful man would ever be uneasy. His true superiority rests on different grounds. (354)

The grounds of human superiority that Müller refers to are the possession of language and the ability to reason, which were frequently used to erect barriers between humans and other species by those who were hostile to the theory of evolution.

<15>In the first two stanzas of "The Lower Life" Kendall parodies this tendency to flirt with human inferiority to other species but then to bury the question in an appeal to reason or language. The first stanza, quoted above, raises the idea of human inferiority and then the first lines of the second stanza imitate the attempt to resolve it in humanity's favor:

But, evolutionists reflect,  
We have the pull in intellect,  
And that's undoubted: (7-9)

However, instead of assuring her readers of their superiority, Kendall asks whether human intelligence is really more valuable than the qualities possessed by other species:

Is wisdom, then, the only test,  
Of lot superlatively blest?  
There have been others.  
Our aeon too will pass, and then  
Are monads so much less than men?  
Alas, my brothers! (37-42)

In "The Lower Life" Kendall presents evolution as a destabilizing force that undermines hierarchies and erodes fixed categories, in opposition to right-wing social Darwinists' hierarchical insistence on the link between social success and Darwinian "fitness". Without referring explicitly to gender, this poem attacks the hierarchical approach to evolution that underpins attempts to use science to prove women's inferiority to men.

<16>Like "The Lower Life," Kendall's poems about talking animals and fossils in *Dreams to Sell* – "Lay of the Trilobite," "Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus," and "The Philanthropist and the Jelly-Fish" – unsettle interspecies hierarchies, particularly by blurring the boundaries between humans and supposedly inferior creatures. Gillian Beer argues that Kendall "take[s] the position of the others of evolution" in her scientific poetry: "the jelly-fish, the dweller in four-dimensioned space, the woman" (201). Beer's juxtaposition of woman and jellyfish implies that there is a continuity between Kendall's identification with the underdog in her poems about "lower species" and her rejection of the theory of female inferiority in

“Woman’s Future” but Beer does not develop this point explicitly. Although Kendall rarely refers directly to gender she writes from a marginalized perspective that allows her to draw different conclusions from Darwin’s work from those that were often drawn by privileged white men.

<17>Kendall’s undermining of social and biological hierarchies is rooted in Darwin’s writings, with their blurring of boundaries between species. In the *Origin of Species* Darwin proved that all organisms ultimately blend into each other and so concepts like “species” and “variety” are merely a convenient way of grouping similar organisms and have no real meaning:

From these remarks it will be seen that I look at the term species, as one arbitrarily given for the sake of convenience to a set of individuals closely resembling each other, and that it does not essentially differ from the term variety, which is given to less distinct and more fluctuating forms. The term variety, again, in comparison with mere individual differences, is also applied arbitrarily, and for mere convenience sake. (108)

This revelation threatened humanity’s special position by blurring the boundary between human and animal as well as making other boundaries and divisions seem less secure. Susan David Bernstein has argued that there is an overlap in Victorian cultural and scientific discourses between the threat to the superior position of humans caused by their biological relationship to “lower” creatures and the threat to social divisions caused by the demands for greater political participation by women and the working classes:

The widening currency of a scientific theory that seemed to run contrary to the verifiable facts of, for instance, evident differences between bears and whales, or between apes and humans, resonates with a more diffused cultural anxiety about social and biological taxonomies as shifting and unreliable. (“Ape” 254)

Kendall alludes to this link between the instability of social and biological categories in her poetry, most notably in “Lay of the Trilobite.” This poem uses several aspects of evolutionary theory, particularly debates about the role of language in separating humans from other species and the recent discovery of egg-laying mammals, to explore the ways in which evolutionary theory and new scientific discoveries unsettled the concept of divisions between humans and other species.

<18>In “Lay of the Trilobite” a smug Victorian gentleman climbs a “mountain’s giddy height ... Because I could not find/ Sufficient vague and mighty thought/ To fill my mighty mind” (1-4). There he encounters a fossilized trilobite who describes the course of human evolution and criticizes modern society, convincing the man that he would have been better off as a trilobite. From the man’s first encounter with the trilobite it becomes clear that we are broadly in the territory of nonsense poetry:

And then, quite natural and free  
Out of his rocky bed,  
That Trilobite he spoke to me,  
And this is what he said; (17-20)

The tone of this section is reminiscent of the nonsense poetry of authors like Lewis Carroll, in which unusual situations are treated as ordinary, or with only mild surprise:

The sun was shining on the sea,  
Shining with all his might;  
He did his very best to make  
The billows smooth and bright –  
And this was odd, because it was  
The middle of the night. (1-6)

“Lay of the Trilobite” is not a nonsense poem but it does resemble this form in its tone and logic. The poem contains several of the elements that Wim Tigges has identified as characteristics of nonsense, particularly foregrounding language, using real words divorced from their original meanings, and playing with boundaries (55, 67, 57). Nonsense dissolves barriers between the real and the fantastic, parodies authoritative discourses, and defamiliarizes ordinary ideas or events so it is an apt choice for a poem that mocks hierarchical interpretations of the authoritative discourse of science and asks the reader to view their own society from an outsider’s perspective. The nonsense elements, combined with Kendall’s references to evolutionary theory, are used to destabilize hierarchies and divisions.

<19>The most obvious way in which “Lay of the Trilobite” resembles a nonsense poem is in its use of a speaking fossil, which is reminiscent of Carroll’s speaking oysters. However, this is not done simply for comic effect but is also a reference to evolutionary debates about species boundaries because Victorian biologists, anthropologists and philologists often treat the possession of articulate language as the definitive boundary between humans and other species. In “The Theoretical Stage, and the Origin of Language,” Max Müller describes language as the “Rubicon” that beasts would not “dare to cross” (360), and in an 1865 essay August Schleicher suggests that a speaking ape should be considered human, while a speechless human should not (78). In the context of these debates, giving language to characters of other species disrupts the boundary between humans and non-humans and challenges the concept of human superiority. As Christine Ferguson observes, the discovery of language in animals “might diminish human identity, by showing its distinguishing capacity for speech to be neither unique, nor necessarily dependent on the reason and large cranial capacity of the *homo sapiens*” (116). The ability of Kendall’s trilobite to speak in perfect English places him on a level of equality with the man and makes any other differences between them seem trivial. As August Schleicher puts it: “If a pig were ever to say to me, ‘I am a pig,’ it would *ipso facto* cease to be a pig” (qtd. in Müller, “Lectures” 182). In other words, in the act of describing his difference from the man – “I didn’t grumble, didn’t steal,/ I *never* took to rhyme:/ Salt water was my frugal meal,/ And carbonate of lime” (53-6) – the trilobite erodes that difference through his use of language.

<20>Like authors of nonsense poetry, Kendall “put[s] the real in jeopardy” and “unsettle[s] fixed positions for the reader and for characters or speakers” (Shires 267, 272). The unsettling of fixed positions is clear in this poem from the blurring of boundaries that is effected through the meter by the end of the poem, when the speaker laments the costs of human evolution:

“I wish our brains were not so good,  
I wish our skulls were thicker,

I wish that Evolution could  
     Have stopped a little quicker;  
 For oh, it was a happy plight,  
     Of liberty and ease,  
 To be a simple Trilobite  
     In the Silurian seas!" (65-72)

By this point in the poem the narrator's speech has degenerated from the almost entirely regular iambic meter of the first two stanzas to encompass the feminine endings of "thicker" (66) and "quicker" (68) and the two dactyls and extra stressed syllable in the final line: "In the Silurian seas" (72). This reflects contamination by the more variable meter of the trilobite's speech. In losing his monopoly on language, the man has lost the source of his human uniqueness and his assumed superiority over others.

<21>Like the trilobite's use of language, Kendall's references to the difficulties of classification in this poem destabilize species categories. In the footnote to this poem in *Dreams to Sell*, Kendall acknowledges her error in having the trilobite declare that "I didn't care - I didn't know/ That I was a Crustacean" (51-2). The footnote playfully reminds the reader of the almost arbitrary nature of divisions between species and families:

He was not a Crustacean. He has since discovered that he was an Arachnid, or something similar. But he says it does not matter. He says they told him wrong once, and they may again. (*Dreams to Sell*, 9)

The barriers between supposedly distinct species or families become artificial and permeable as a result of evolutionary theory. Classification "does not matter" because all species graduate into each other and the current categories may be subject to change:

Certainly no clear line of demarcation has as yet been drawn between species and sub-species ... or, again, between sub-species and well-marked varieties, or between lesser varieties and individual differences. These differences blend into each other in an insensible series; (Darwin, *Origin* 107)

Kendall's work captures this sense of all categories being arbitrary and provisional. The reference to monotremes in "Lay of the Trilobite", "in the silent sea/ Your ancestors were Monotremes —/ Whatever these may be" (26-8), also highlights difficulties of classification. Monotremes are egg-laying mammals like the duck-billed platypus and the echidna. This order of mammals was the focus of much scientific and popular interest in 1885, when "The Lay of the Trilobite" was first published, because it was only the previous year that the zoologist William Caldwell had provided conclusive proof that monotremes lay eggs. This discovery helped to support the theory of evolution by providing a link between mammals and reptiles. It also unsettled taxonomic systems by "call[ing] into question both the zoological assumptions current before [monotremes'] advent and the systems in which those assumptions were embedded" (Ritvo 10). "Lay of the Trilobite" engages with the idea of the slipperiness of classification that this discovery provoked and uses it to imply that concepts of absolute difference and hierarchy have no place in an evolutionary worldview.

<22>As well as indicating the trilobite's awareness that monotremes do not fit into any pre-existing category, the phrase "Whatever these may be" also suggests that the meaning of this word is not really important. The pleasure that the poem takes in rhyming technical scientific

words such as “monotremes” or “crustacean,” regardless of whether these words are appropriate to the sentence, is another way in which “Lay of the Trilobite” resembles a nonsense poem. The trilobite’s claim that monotremes are direct ancestors of humans is incorrect, reinforcing the idea that “monotremes” functions in this poem as a nonsense word rather than a specific taxonomic category. “Monotremes” rhymes with “dreams,” two lines previously, it fits the meter and it sounds appropriately scientific, and in the context of this poem these factors are more important than the meaning of the word. The poem undermines the associations of scientific language with power and authority and destabilizes seemingly fixed categories and hierarchies of language, in the same way that it undermines divisions and hierarchies between species. These elements of nonsense poetry make the poem appear less overtly political than it otherwise would be but also allow Kendall to take her questioning of apparently objective reality further than she could in a more serious poem.

<23>As James Paradis has noted, between the publication of *The Origin* and the end of the century, “[c]aricaturists like [George] du Maurier and Linley Sambourne, absorbed by the sheer strangeness of Darwinian metamorphosis, furnished a steady stream of morphological eccentricities that revealed a profound comic impulse in the materials of evolution” (150). Paradis focuses on the recurrent gorilla imagery of the early 1860s, which cartoonists used to explore the implications of evolutionary theory for human ancestry and taxonomy. He notes that gorilla imagery in *Punch* is often used to comment indirectly on human hierarchies: “Gorilla imagery dramatically shifted the social center, for, next to the hierarchy of biological ancestry, other hierarchies now became trivial by comparison” (157-8). Paradis applies this observation to the representation of class hierarchies, but treating men as identical to apes or other non-human species also trivializes any perceived difference in status between men and women. Kendall uses a similar technique by displacing the theme of gender inequality onto the inequality between species in order to take the emotional sting out of these ideas and allow readers to view them objectively.

<24>Unlike other *Punch* contributors, Kendall does not use apes to blur boundaries between humans and other species. There are several possible reasons for this. The association between apes and evolutionary theory was less straightforward in the 1880s than it was in the 1860s. As Bernstein notes, the use of ape imagery in the late nineteenth century often carried racial connotations, generally in connection with Irish or African men, rather than simply being associated with evolution (“Designs” 77). If Kendall had used imagery that had such racist associations she would simply have replaced one social hierarchy with another. Furthermore, the association of humans and apes had become commonplace by the 1880s and no longer possessed the power to shock. The species that Kendall uses – the trilobite, ichthyosaurus, and jellyfish – are generally recognized as “low” species, and the trilobite and ichthyosaurus have proved their inferiority by becoming extinct. The linking of such “inferior” species with human beings stretches the idea of evolutionary kinship even further than gorilla imagery does, and further undermines the idea of humanity’s special position in nature.

<25>As well as being seen as low in the scale of nature, the species that Kendall chooses to write about all blur boundaries or cause taxonomic confusion. The question of whether the trilobite in “Lay of the Trilobite” was a crustacean or an arachnid has already been discussed, but similar questions are raised by jellyfish and ichthyosauri. Jellyfish lie on the margins of solid and liquid, and animal and plant forms. A periodical article on jellyfish, published in 1880, notes that “[s]o unresisting is the bodily fabric of these beings, that they seem to drain away into a shapeless pulp if we attempt, even carefully and gently, to lift them from their

native waters” (Wilson 208). The same article highlights the close relationship of jellyfish to “zoophytes,” which “are so plant-like that, when picked up on the beach by ingenuous collectors of seaweeds, their plant-nature seems unquestionable” (214). In Kendall’s “The Philanthropist and the Jelly-Fish,” in which a man tries to rescue a jellyfish he finds stranded on the beach, Kendall highlights the liminal status of these creatures. The jellyfish’s rejection of the philanthropist’s aid, on the grounds that she is incapable of feeling and does not need rescuing, draws attention to her lack of a central nervous system: “I’m dead to woe or bliss/ *“I haven’t a Sensorium, / And that is how it is”* (51-2). Ichthyosauri also cause taxonomic confusion. As John Glendening has noted, part of the fascination and monstrosity of ichthyosauri for their nineteenth-century observers lay in their being “hodge-podges of features belonging to various animals” (33). Ichthyosauri shared characteristics with modern dolphins, whales, crocodiles, fish and lizards, making them, like monotremes, impossible to classify in any existing genus. In this way, Kendall blurs boundaries through her choice of species as well as through the uses to which she puts these creatures in her poetry. In doing so, she makes use of evolution’s erosion of boundaries and hierarchies crucially to call accepted or “common sense” social divisions into question.

<26>All three of Kendall’s *Dreams to Sell* poems in which animals or fossils speak – “Lay of the Trilobite,” “Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus,” and “The Philanthropist and the Jelly-Fish”<sup>4</sup> – were originally published in *Punch* between 1885 and 1886, and all three are accompanied in *Punch* by illustrations by Linley Sambourne, in which he blurs boundaries between humans and other species.<sup>5</sup> The ichthyosaurus is anthropomorphized and is in a schoolroom, wearing a mortarboard and a pair of over-sized shoes, while the jellyfish and trilobite are nearly as large as the humans in the pictures and have human faces and, in particular, human mouths. These pictures reinforce the similarities between the humans and other creatures in these poems while the anthropomorphized mouths emphasize the importance of speech in making these creatures more human. Sambourne was an appropriate choice of illustrator for these poems, given his own interests in evolution and the blurring of boundaries between humans and other species. His “Designs After Nature” series of illustrations, which depicted fashionable women whose clothes made them resemble hybrids of humans and birds, insects or other creatures, appeared in *Punch* between 1867 and 1876. Bernstein describes “Designs After Nature” as reflecting “a cultural preoccupation with taxonomies of nature, and with speculating ... about the margins between humans and other animals” (Bernstein “Designs” 65). Kendall’s work engages with the same cultural preoccupation and uses it to undermine ideas of human superiority.

<27>Despite Sambourne’s interest in the implications of Darwin’s work, his illustrations are not always scientifically accurate. As Holmes observes, the trilobite in the illustration to “The Lay of the Trilobite” is not a trilobite at all, but a eurypterid, or sea scorpion:

The fact that *Punch* illustrates a poem about a trilobite with a picture of a eurypterid strongly suggests that the trilobite was for this particular illustrator and the magazine’s editor, and perhaps for Kendall too, a vague concept – some form of ancient fossil from the “Silurian seas” (l. 7), as the poem puts it – rather than a clear palaeontological type. (“Lay” l.5)

The inaccuracies in this illustration suit the poem’s sense of the triviality of species boundaries and its playful negligence about the details of scientific theories. In this way, the context to these poems as well as the content emphasizes the related themes of the blurring of species boundaries and the undermining of hierarchies that recur throughout Kendall’s

science poetry. Kendall uses these themes to contest rigid hierarchical interpretations of evolution and to emphasize the destabilizing aspects of Darwin's work. In opposition to those commentators who used evolutionary justifications to try to fix social hierarchies in their current form, Kendall presents a reading of evolution as fluid, anti-hierarchical and playful. The illustrations to these poems in *Punch* help to emphasize these aspects and to foreground them in readers' minds.

### Conclusion

<28>As I have argued, humorous verse can serve a political purpose by subverting or questioning elements of the dominant culture, undermining smug male characters and foregrounding minority perspectives. It can defamiliarize human society to make readers observe their own world from the outside and to demonstrate that there is nothing inevitable about the current state of affairs. Beneath the surface of Kendall's evolutionary poetry lies a quiet rejection of a scientific mindset that is fixated on classification and ranking. Kendall's work rarely addresses gender directly but her approach to science is indebted to a female experience of marginalization and alleged inferiority. Instead of rejecting science altogether, Kendall highlights themes within evolution that undo the meanings that are often ascribed to it. She demonstrates a clear-sighted understanding of Darwin's work and its cultural implications and, although she wears her knowledge lightly, her work is clearly informed by her scientific awareness.

<29>Focusing on allusions to the scientific discourse of female inferiority helps to move the discussion of gender and evolution beyond the more overt polemic found in novels and feminist tracts in a way that is relevant to poetry, in which the meaning is often less explicit than in prose. There are several reasons why women poets might have chosen to address the themes of evolution and gender indirectly. With some notable exceptions, such as Constance Naden, female poets were likely to have had less scientific education than their male peers and may have been reluctant to take too strident a position on the implications of evolution for human society for fear of provoking a negative response. This was a problem for most women but the indirect approach seems to be particularly favored by poets, perhaps because for many "the aim ... was to write good poetry more than to make a political statement" (Hughes, 1). Rather than being simply a defensive response to hostility, this implicitly political approach could have some advantages. By not presenting a poem as a feminist statement a poet could overcome a reader's kneejerk hostile reaction. Displacing arguments about the role of women onto other species could defamiliarize human society to allow readers to view these questions from a more objective, external perspective. It could make common sense seem like nonsense and vice versa. Taking humans out of the equation could be a more effective way of changing a reader's mind by making the question less emotional. Kendall's work exemplifies this approach.

<30>As a Christian evolutionist, a feminist *Punch* contributor and an author of nonsense-inspired poetry with a political subtext, Kendall does not fit into neat categories, and her responses to evolution are equally resistant to classification. An examination of Kendall's poetry helps to complicate and expand our understanding of nineteenth-century women's responses to Darwin's work. Her humorous subversion of masculine discourses takes a middle course between outright rejection of evolution and acceptance of biological essentialism that broadens our understanding of feminist responses to evolution. In her difference from other feminist evolutionists, and particularly in her focus on women's brains rather than their wombs, Kendall reminds us of the diversity of perspectives among Darwin's

female readers and prevents us from making simplistic generalizations about the impact of Darwin's work on Victorian understandings of gender.

---

### Notes

I would like to thank Natasha Alden, Mary Chadwick, Kate Gallon, Tom Francis, Matt Jarvis and Marion Thain for feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I am also extremely grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their prompt and detailed feedback, which has made this piece much stronger than it otherwise would have been.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the work of Brown, Groth, Holmes, Moine, Murphy, Tange and Thain.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include Sally Ledger's description of *Punch* as the "most misogynist of Victorian journals" (94) and Fraser, Green and Johnston's description of *Punch* as "perhaps one of the most potent and long-lasting barometers of masculine antagonism towards women" (168).

<sup>3</sup> Letters dated September 27<sup>th</sup> and September 30<sup>th</sup> 1887 in May Kendall's folder in Contributors Ke-King, British Library manuscript collections.

<sup>4</sup> These are the titles from *Dreams to Sell*. In *Punch* "Lay of the Trilobite" was titled "The Lay of the Trilobite" and "The Philanthropist and the Jelly-Fish" was titled "The Jelly-Fish and the Philanthropist."

<sup>5</sup> I have identified Sambourne as the artist by comparing the signatures to signatures on illustrations known to be by Sambourne and then by searching for the relevant entries in his diaries. Sambourne describes drawing these pictures in his diary entries for January 14<sup>th</sup> 1885, February 4<sup>th</sup> 1885 and October 15<sup>th</sup> 1886.

### Works Cited

Beer, Gillian. "Rhyming as Resurrection." *Memory and Memorials 1789-1914*, edited by Matthew Campbell, Jacqueline M. Labbe and Sally Shuttleworth, Routledge, 2000, pp. 189-207.

Bernstein, Susan David. "Ape Anxiety: Sensation Fiction, Evolution, and the Genre Question." *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2001, pp. 250-71.

---. "Designs After Nature: Evolutionary Fashions, Animals, and Gender." *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, edited by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay, Ashgate, 2007, pp. 65-79.

Birch, Katy. "Gender, Anonymity and Humour in Women's Writing for *Punch*." *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s: The Victorian Period*, edited by Alexis Easley, Clare Gill and Beth Rodgers, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 351-364.

Brown, Susan. "'A Still and Mute-Born Vision': Locating Mathilde Blind's Reproductive Poetics." *Victorian Women Poets*, edited by Alison Chapman, The English Association, 2003, pp. 123-144.



Carroll, Lewis. "The Walrus and the Carpenter." *The Poets and the Poetry of the Nineteenth Century (Humour): George Crabbe to Edmund B.V. Christian*, edited by Alfred H. Miles, George Routledge & Sons Ltd., n.d. 451-4.

Contributors Ke-King. Punch Archive, British Library, London, Manuscript Collections, Add Ms 88937/4/62.

Darwin, Charles. *Charles Darwin's Notebooks, 1836-1844*. Translated and edited by Paul H. Barrett et. al., Cambridge University Press, 1987.

---. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. 1879. Edited by James Moore and Adrian Desmond, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Penguin Classics, 2004.

---. *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. 1859. Edited by J.W. Burrow, Penguin Classics, 1985.

Debelius, Margaret. "Countering a Counterpoetics: Ada Leverson and Oscar Wilde." *Women and British Aestheticism*, edited by Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades, University Press of Virginia, 1999, pp. 192-210.

Fee, Elizabeth. "Nineteenth-Century Craniology: The Study of the Female Skull." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 53, no. 3, 1979, pp. 415-33.

Ferguson, Christine. *Language, Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle: The Brutal Tongue*. Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006.

Fraser, Hilary, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston. *Gender and the Victorian Periodical*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Glendenning, John. "'The World-Renowned Ichthyosaurus': A Nineteenth-Century Problematic and its Representations." *Journal of Literature and Science*, vol. 2, no.1, 2009, pp. 23-47.

Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Mismeasure of Man*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1981.

Groth, Helen. "Victorian Women Poets and Scientific Narratives." *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, edited by Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 325-351.

Holmes, John. "The Challenge of Evolution in Victorian Poetry." *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, edited by Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 39-63.

---. "'The Lay of the Trilobite': Re-reading May Kendall." *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, no. 11, 2010, doi: <http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.575>.

Hughes, Linda. *New Woman Poets: An Anthology*. The Eighteen Nineties Society, 2001.

Kendall, May. "Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus." *Punch*, vol. 88 (14 Feb. 1885), p. 82.

---. *Dreams to Sell*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1887.

---. "The Jelly-Fish and the Philanthropist." *Punch*, 91 (27 Nov. 1886), p. 255.

---. "The Lay of the Trilobite." *Punch*, vol. 88 (24 Jan. 1885), p. 41.

Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*. Manchester University Press, 1997.

Levine, George. *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2006.

Malane, Rachel. *Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences*. Peter Lang, 2005.

Moine, Fabienne. *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry*. Routledge, 2016.

Müller, Max. "Lectures on Mr. Darwin's Philosophy of Language." *The Origin of Language*. Edited by Roy Harris, Thoemmes Press, 1996, pp. 147-233.

---. "The Theoretical Stage, and the Origin of Language." *Lectures on the Science of Language Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in April, May and June, 1861*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862, pp. 349-99.

Murphy, Patricia. "Fated Marginalization: Women and Science in the Poetry of Constance Naden." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2002, pp. 107-30.

Noakes, Richard. "Punch and Comic Journalism in Mid-Victorian Britain." *Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical: Reading the Magazine of Nature*, edited by Geoffrey Cantor et. al. Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 91-122.

Paradis, James G. "Satire and Science in Victorian Culture." *Victorian Science in Context*, edited by Bernard Lightman, University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 143-175.

Ritvo, Harriet. *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*. Harvard University Press, 1998.

Romanes, George J. "Mental Differences Between Men and Women." *The Nineteenth Century*, 21, 1887, pp. 654-672.

Sambourne, Linley. "Edward Linley Sambourne Diaries." *Rbkc.gov.uk*, 2018, <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/subsites/museums/18staffordterrace/archives/thesambournefamilydiaries-1/elsdiaries.aspx>.

Schleicher, August. "On the Significance of Language for the Natural History of Man." 1865. Translated by J. Peter Maher. *Linguistics and Evolutionary Theory: Three Essays by August Schleicher, Ernst Haeckel, and Wilhelm Bleek*, edited by Konrad Koerner, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983, pp. 73-82. Amsterdam Classics in Linguistics, 1800-1925.

Shires, Linda M. "Fantasy, Nonsense, Parody, and the Status of the Real: The Example of Carroll." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1988, pp. 267-83.

Stepan, Nancy. *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800-1960*. Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982.

Tange, Andrea Kaston. "Constance Naden and the Erotics of Evolution: Mating the Woman of Letters with the Man of Science." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2006, pp. 200-240.

Thain, Marion. "'Scientific Wooing': Constance Naden's Marriage of Science and Poetry." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2003, pp. 151-169.

Tigges, Wim. *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*. Rodopi, 1988.

Walker, Nancy A. *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

Wilson, Andrew. "Jelly-fishes." *Belgravia: A London Magazine*, vol. 42, no. 166, 1880, pp. 207-223.